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AUTHOR Fisher, Peter J.
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ABSTRACT

A study used focus groups to determine what teachers from a variety of settings think should be the multicultural content of literacy courses for preservice teachers. The three focus groups consisted of a total of 22 preschool through high-school teachers, all of whom taught, or had taught, in culturally and/or linguistically diverse settings. The groups were asked to respond to two questions: What is the nature of multicultural literacy? and What implications does this have for the teaching of preservice literacy classes? Field notes were taken and the sessions were tape recorded. General categories of the content of the discussion were developed for each group, and then comparisons were made across groups. Multicultural literacy for most of these teachers could be broken down into two ideas--what counted as multicultural, and how ethnic and linguistic diversity affected learning. Some teachers had wider definitions than others, but for almost all of them the result of their definitions was a sensitivity to the needs of individual children, and the importance of differentiated instruction. These concerns were also the major implications for preservice literacy classes. Unlike the definitions of experts, the groups did not talk about issues of educating for democracy or equity and social justice. (Contains 21 references.) (RS)

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Peter J. Fisher
National-Louis University
2840 Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60201

Teachers' Views of the Nature of Multicultural Literacy

(Teachers' Views)

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Teachers' Views of the Nature of Multicultural Literacy

Today's preservice teachers will teach large numbers of students who are not like them linguistically and culturally (Banks & McGee Banks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Perez, 1998; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 1997). In addition, those concerned with standards for teachers are commonly including knowledge and performance criteria related to cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity (Illinois State Board of Education, 1999). There are, therefore, increasing demands on new teachers in relation to developing literacy instruction that meets the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. The issue for college faculty is how to prepare students in preservice literacy methods classes to meet these demands.

Definitions of multicultural literacy abound (Banks, 1991; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Most include two components - one which addresses the issue of diverse cultural experiences, and one which is concerned with education for democracy or equity and social justice. For example, Diamond and Moore (1995) propose:

> Multicultural literacy is the process of linking cultural experiences, histories, and languages that all children bring to school *with* language learning and academic learning that take place in school.
>
> Multicultural literacy further activates silent voices, opens closed minds, promotes academic achievement, and enables students to think and act critically in a pluralistic, democratic society.

As a result of such definitions, there are recommendations from many experts as to appropriate literacy instruction for multicultural populations in schools (Clair, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Fitzgerald, 1995; Gersten, 1996; Perez, 1996, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1994; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 1997). There are

also a growing number of reports about appropriate instruction for preservice classes in relation to literacy methods for diverse populations (Chevalier & Houser, 1997; Goodwin, 1997; Haberman, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998; LaFramboise & Griffith, 1997; Tiedt, 1992). However, there is evidence that students feel unprepared to deal with the demands of increasingly diverse classrooms (Barksdale-Ladd et al., 1998). Although the experts (cited above) have made many recommendations, teachers who work in such classrooms have not been asked for their opinions. This research used focus groups (Panyan, Hillman, & Liggett, 1997; Ribich, Agostino, & Barone, 1998) to determine what the teachers from a variety of settings think should be the multicultural content of literacy courses for preservice teachers.

Method

Three focus group consisting of a total of 22 teachers, all or whom taught, or had taught, in culturally and/or linguistically diverse settings. Attendance was voluntary. Each group was asked to respond to two questions:

(i) What is the nature of multicultural literacy?

(ii) What implications does this have for the teaching of preservice literacy classes?

I made field notes and tape-recorded the three sessions. I did not comment on the conversation. If discussion lagged, which it rarely did, I prompted with one of three further questions (if the topic had not been addressed).

(a) How does this impact on your expectations of students?

(b) How about second-language learners (or learners whose oral language is not standard English)?

(c) How about changing teachers' attitudes?

The groups met from 90 to 120 minutes. The membership of each group will be described in relation to the findings.

The tape recordings were listened to several times, and compared to the field notes. General categories of the content of discussion were developed

for each group, and then comparisons made across groups. Where possible the consensus of the group was inferred from what was said, although I did not ask the teachers to draw any specific conclusions.

Results

Group 1

The group consisted of five primary school teachers from a large school district in the Chicago metropolitan area. African-American students comprise 43% of the district-wide student population, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans comprise an additional 10%. The teachers all had more than 10 years teaching experience. Two of the five were African-American. They were all females, and four of the five had experience as cooperating teachers. One had taught college methods classes in science and math. They all knew me, and each other, from another project that we worked on together.

Multicultural Literacy

Much of the teachers' talk drew on their own experiences, as student teachers, teachers, and parents. While never specifically defining multicultural literacy, the students that they talked about were diverse in terms of ethnicity, linguistic background and ability. While recommending that preservice teachers needed to learn about different cultures, the group cautioned about thinking in ethnic stereotypes. In relation to ethnic diversity one teacher said:

> *My classroom looks colored. There are 15 kids - 10 blacks and 5 whites. But really there are 5 blacks, 5 Hispanics and 5 whites. Although some students look black they are not African-American, and we need to be aware of different cultural backgrounds, not just based on skin color.*

Another teacher commented on how at recent interviews she and her colleagues had been concerned about stereotypical behavior the interviewees had learned in their college classes, such as the home literacy patterns of different cultures. While they felt that such

information could be useful, the new teachers that they interviewed had translated it into generalities that were as dangerous as ignorance. One teacher raised the issue of socio-economic diversity.

> *Don't make assumptions about ethnicity. Socioeconomic factors may be more important.*

This comment led to much discussion of the effect of poverty on the lives of their students. All the teachers demonstrated incredible knowledge of their students, and sensitivity to the demands that were placed on even young children in terms of family care. This sensitivity to specific family issues occurred several times throughout the meeting.

There was wide ranging discussion of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, processing problems. Second language learning issues were raised, but are not an issue for many teachers in the district. These teachers, then, saw the multicultural component of multicultural literacy as referring to a highly diverse student body in terms of ethnicity, linguistic background, disabilities, socio-economic background, and specific family issues.

The literacy issues faced by these students were primarily indicated by reference to specific pedagogy. These teachers stressed the importance of developing talk in the classroom, of the use of writing workshop, and of selecting materials wisely. One teacher told of a situation in her class with a student who at 6 years of age was the care giver for her 5 siblings. The student was being "looked after" by an aunt and uncle who were drug addicts. After the teacher read the book "Momma Who Loves Me?" to the class, this little girl asked, "Whose my Momma, Ms. Lake?" Other teachers talked of the importance of selecting materials for instruction that were appropriate both in content and in difficulty level. The final specific literacy strategy that was mentioned was making connections to the home, such as sending books home through a book bag program, and having volunteer parents help with literacy

activities in classrooms. Clearly the literacy part of multicultural literacy, for these teachers, had as much to do with adapting to the students' needs as specific teaching strategies to address particular literacy processes. This theme of child-centered teaching was even more prevalent in relation to general issues about teaching that student teachers needed to be familiar with.

Implications for Preservice Literacy Classes

Many of the teachers' suggestions had broader implications than just for literacy classes. The primary emphasis of their remarks concerned planning for differentiated instruction.

(i) Student teachers can take a bigger leap in terms of planning for differentiated instruction. I have seen such linear planning. Making reading groups is a big leap for them. How do you deal with variability? That's something that is really critical.

(ii) I've come to realize the importance of choice - the importance of choice in differentiated instruction.

(iii) Teaching is gratifying because of being sensitive to every child.

This sense of teaching to meet the needs of each child was reinforced by a focus on personal responsibility for each student.

(i) As a parent I've learned the importance of looking at the child as an individual - How would that parent want me to treat that child? When I see a child struggling say, "That is my child."

(ii) With student teachers it's important to ask, "What message are you sending with assessment?" …You need to think, "When that child fails, I fail."

A third important issue was that of expectations, although it was acknowledged that this grew with experience.

(i) (Success) has a lot to do with teacher expectations. It's important to know the background and the culture, but it's also important to expect the same of everyone.

(ii) Teacher expectations are so important.

(iii) It took me a while to know what a first-grade child is like, but I think a good rule is "when in doubt, push them a little more." I never had a class like that in college - when to push.

(iv) It takes so many years of teaching to really feel like you've got a handle on it.

The implications from these categories of statements is that we as college teachers need to do a better job of preparing students to differentiate instruction, teach to the child, and have clear expectations for success. In addition the teachers had specific suggestions and gripes.

One category of suggestions related to classes that new teachers needed. These classes included an ESL class to learn about issues of second language learning and literacy. Another class would be one in which they tutored a student one-on-one so students began to understand the nature of literacy processes and treating each child as an individual. A third was an anthropology class, or something similar, that dealt with several of the most common cultures represented in the local school districts. Finally, these teachers thought that a mentoring program was extremely valuable - those who had had a mentor loved the experience; those who had not wished that they had.

A major gripe was that in their experience, student teachers had not been expecting to follow the school curriculum. They had come to their student teaching with various "units" that they expected to implement without reference to what the school expected. The teachers felt that school, district and state mandates were an important part of

their lives, and student teachers had to learn how to deal with them. They acknowledged the tension between academic achievement, curricula demands, and individual expectations, but felt that this tension needed to be addressed in classes so that new teachers understood the reality of teaching.

Group 2

The group consisted of eight teachers from pre-school through high school, all of whom were certified reading specialists. Members of the group had all been teaching more than 13 years. All of them were female. One was African-American and one Japanese-American. They were all teaching, or had taught, in situations that were diverse in terms of either ethnicity, linguistic background, disabilities, or socioeconomic status. Six of them had taught college classes, and seven had been cooperating teachers. They were all completing, or had completed, a doctorate in Reading and Language, and knew me from this experience. Most of them knew each other from classes or professional organizations.

Multicultural Literacy

Perhaps surprisingly, given their background, the group chose to focus on the multicultural part of the question, and did not address the literacy component in detail. Even in their discussion of multiculturalism, they tended toward a focus on ethnicity. They talked about the importance of being sensitive to cultural issues and the difficulty of learning about cultural groups that were new to their classrooms.

(i) Different cultures have different expectations.

(ii) You have to teach to the world, but just when you think you have a handle, you get a new "culture" in your room. Each new cultural group you have are the guinea pigs until you learn from them.

(iii) There are stereotypes about cultures; within cultures there are differences. The length of time in the States makes different

degrees of Americanization. We are getting beyond a homogeneous 'Arab' culture, or 'Indian' culture, or whatever.

At times there seemed to be two levels of conversation occurring. For example, one comment about how we are multicultural was taken by some to refer to the group or our society, and by others to mean that we as individuals become multicultural by addressing our own beliefs and practices.

(i) Multiculturalism is everywhere - Iowa, Chicago. No matter where you attend school, in your lifetime you will teach in a multicultural setting.

(ii) *We tend to think of multicultural as "other than" - it is us.*

(iii) *We need to look into ourselves; we are multicultural.*

(iv) Multiculturalism means we need to address our own issues of prejudice and our own attitudes.

Although not specifically stated, it appears that comments such as the last two arose from concerns with equity and social justice, and the ways in which we can begin to address them.

There was also some discussion of the curriculum. Some comments focused on the broader issues of the general school curriculum, and its biases in favor of the "majority" culture.

(i) *Mainstream means it's the language that all the books are written in.*

(ii) *Who gets to choose the cultural heritage that we get to pass on?*

(iii) *Everybody had prejudice, but we need to look critically at the dead white male perspective.*

More specifically some teachers were comfortable with a "unit" approach

to teaching about other cultures, whereas others favored a more integrated approach.

(i) *It's valuable to learn about other cultures to understand our commonalties. We studied Native Americans …*

(ii) *One of my pet peeves is Black History Month. It gives license to trivialize other cultures …*

Yes … Japanese is kimonos and chopsticks!

Clearly there is some disparity here with expectations of a multicultural curriculum. It highlights the complexity of the issues of which these teachers are well aware - that multicultural education means different things in different settings.

In relation to pedagogy for literacy instruction, teachers again drew on their own experiences, talking about the great new children's literature, books on tape, the importance of home-school connections, the use of dramatic interpretation that allowed the use of the children's own language, and child-centeredness. They also recognized that the nature of the literacy curriculum changes as students move through the grades, and this impacts on what is meant by multicultural literacy.

(i) The curriculum changes. Initially it involves breaking the code, with the transition from a second language, and all that. As they get older it becomes different - the goal is to be critical.

(ii) The function of literacy changes at different grade levels. It dictates what we need to teach - what pieces I choose.

These teachers then, demonstrated a varying level of sophistication in understanding multicultural issues in schools, but recognized the complexity of the issues involved, including the importance of addressing our own prejudices and biases. From my experience with these teachers in other settings, I know many of them are concerned with

issues of gender, the classification of special needs children, linguistic diversity, and the distribution of resources by socio-economic status. Surprisingly, in this session they did not choose to explore multiculturalism much beyond ethnicity.

Implications for Preservice Literacy Classes

Like the first group, these teachers saw that differentiated instruction was a major component of teaching in a multicultural society.

(i) You need to look at children as individuals with a history.

(ii) Even seasoned teachers struggle with differentiated instruction for kids of varying ability and backgrounds.

(iii) I tell my student teachers, "I don't want to see this whole class lesson plan. Show me how your lesson plans account for differentiated instruction."

(iv) Since there are differences within cultures, you need to look at each kid as an individual.

Clearly these teachers recognized the importance of developing sensitivity to individual students, whatever their background. However, there was disagreement about addressing attitudes in preservice classes. Some of the teachers felt that the classes should focus on methods, while others felt that addressing prejudices and misconceptions about "outsiders" was as important.

(i) Teaching them how to teach children to read is more important.

(ii) They need to know what is the purpose of the lesson and how to implement it.

(iii) With new teachers coming from other occupations, who have experience of a diverse society, diversity is not an issue- they

don't know their content (in student teaching).

(iv) They need to delve into these (attitudes) as part of the class. If their ideas are challenged then they begin to change.

(v) They need to understand an outsider perspective.

The tension between specific pedagogy and theoretical frames, including attitudes to students and instruction, is one we all face in our classes. This tension was reflected in the discussion. However, there was only one suggestion for specific pedagogy in preservice classrooms (materials that introduced contrasting perspectives on the same issue). Nevertheless, some recommendations included pedagogical ideas that tried to bridge the gap.

Infusing elements of multiculturalism into the classes was felt to be important.

(i) If it is something valued in their coursework, then they are looking for it in the classroom

(ii) Young teachers have so much on their plate, then if they are not exposed to it, they won't use it.

Placement for student teaching and observation was felt to be critical. For our colleges in the Chicago metropolitan area, finding placements in multiethnic settings should not be a problem. However, even when confronted with the issue of colleges elsewhere, these teachers chose not to expand their definition of multicultural to other populations. Perhaps this was because of the frame set early in the discussion by the remark

Teachers are trained for mainstream white students. When they (the students) don't fit (the model) then they panic.

Group 3

The group consisted of nine teachers from kindergarten through

high school. Members of the group had been teaching from 4 to 12 years; most of them for less than 10 years. All of them were white females. They were all teaching, or had taught, in situations that were diverse in terms of ethnicity and language background. One was currently a cooperating teacher, but none of the others had that experience. None of the group had taught college classes. They were all completing, or had completed, a masters' degree in Reading and Language, and knew me from this experience. Most of them knew each other from classes or professional organizations.

Multicultural Literacy

Like the first group, the meaning of multicultural literacy was defined more by who and what was talked about, than in a formal manner. Again, talk often focused on the multicultural component first. By chance, rather than design, this group included an ESL teacher and seven other teachers who were currently in classrooms or schools where there were significant numbers of students for whom English was a second language. Not surprisingly, therefore, the discussion centered round many issues in teaching these students. However, multicultural was extended to include ethnic as well as linguistic diversity.

(i) I have some Vietnamese students, and I don't have the language to talk to them, nor the resources to bring materials for all the cultures into my classroom.

(ii) I have two Hispanic kids and the rest are African-American. Most of them are reading at a second-grade level (in fifth grade).

(iii) There are two students in my school who receive both ESL and special ed - we have 5 different Indian dialects - half the kids are Hispanic, 20% Indian, great many white, but very few African-American.

(iv) Ethnic diversity is seen so often as a deficit rather than

as knowledge and knowing.

(v) I have an African-American friend who told me "You know a lot of my white teachers had me on the 'maid at the Ramada Inn' track."

Although two of the teachers had special education training, this was not raised as being a component of multicultural, nor was gender ever mentioned.

This group was quite articulate about the literacy issues facing the students in their classes. Some related to linguistic issues in decoding.

(i) I try to teach phonics, initial sounds, but they don't know the names of the pictures to know the first sounds.

(ii) I use word families because phonics doesn't work - they don't have some of the sounds in their language.

(iii) The more concrete I can go the better and generate from there to letter and sound.

Others noted the appropriateness of literacy pedagogy that had been learned in classes for all students.

(i) It's a matter of realizing that strategies we learned in classes work well with ESL students.

(ii) We use reading and writing workshop …

(iii) I'm using audio books and books on tape …

(iv) It's important to match kids with books at their level

(v) They're not motivated to read. They become motivated when you match students and materials.

There was some debate about becoming literate in a native language first. Most of the group agreed with, or chose not to challenge, the ESL teacher who was a very vocal advocate for this approach. Several

teachers shared ways in which they brought native languages into linguistically diverse settings.

(i) I use a translation web site for worksheets, letters home, that sort of thing.

(ii) I use Spanish worksheets for all of them to practice their handwriting - they love it.

(iii) It's important to have bilingual classes, although sometimes there's not enough integration.

I agree it's that children need to be taught in their native language, but it's a bind when you're not able to have dual language schools.

(iv) We have Polish bilingual classes, but I have a student (in reading class) where it is hard to know if it is a language or a learning problem.

There were no suggestions for specific pedagogy other than those relating to language diversity. However, when one person raised the issue of critical literacy, the topic of the discussion was switched to the description of a classroom practice that did not address the issue.

These teachers, then, saw multicultural literacy as relating primarily to issues of language diversity. Drawing on their own experiences they talked about strategies that worked for them. In one sense, the discussion became a sharing of ideas, as it often does when teachers come together. However, they did draw some implications for preservice classes.

Implications for Preservice Literacy Classes

The central issue that arose was developing sensitivity to students. Two ways of developing understanding seemed to be advocated - listening and learning from the students themselves, and developing

empathy from diverse cultural experiences.

(i) Teacher education should include living in another culture - it's a lack in my education.

Yes. I see the frustration with immigrants. Until you experience that … the language barrier …you don't understand the issues.

How about foreign teacher exchange?

(ii) It's not enough to go into diverse schools. You need to spend time in the neighborhoods.

(iii) I learned from my students, learned from what their families do, what they love to talk about. You love them and develop empathy.

(iv) That's the key. Listen to their experiences and you can connect with them.

While these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, one is more child-centered and matches the thinking of the other groups in focusing on the child, while the other sees there being knowledge that can be gained from personal experiences as an "outsider."

The specific suggestions for pedagogy in preservice classrooms matched these ideas , and included experiencing the "outsider" perspective.

Katerina put us in a reverse role in class - read to us in Spanish. It was very interesting to look at it from that perspective.

It also included ways of learning about other cultures.

(i) There should be case studies where you talk about kids from different cultures. Videotapes from various areas …

(ii) Cross-cultural training is necessary. There's a program, Windows to the World …

(iii) A cultural diversity class would be very useful.

The gripes about teacher preparation also reflected their own

experiences, which were more recent than for members of the other groups.

(i) Student teaching is all homogeneous.

(ii) There is a disconnect between the training and the schools.

This lack of practical experiences in diverse settings was seen as not being compensated by what was learned in class.

In general this group focused more on the practical aspects of classroom teaching than the other two groups. Much of their conversation is not included because it reflected good literacy instruction for all students. They recognized that many of the strategies that they had learned about in classes were appropriate for ESL students, who were the primary focus of their conversation.

Summary and Conclusions

I had hoped when embarking on this research that teachers from diverse classrooms and backgrounds would provide some interesting insights on what multicultural literacy meant for them and its implications for preservice classes. After the focus groups, and after looking at the data again and again, I am left with a tremendous admiration and respect for what these teachers do, what they know, and their commitment to helping all children learn. They were articulate in describing some of the issues which they face on a daily basis. However, most of the discussion did not surprise me. Part of this may have been my familiarity with the teachers, which I had thought to be an advantage - they could relax more because they knew me. Part of it may have been in selecting who to invite, I unconciously placed a narrow definition of multiculturalism on the selection process - I only invited participants that I knew had taught or were teaching in ethnically and linguistically diverse classrooms. By making this selection, I almost guaranteed that this would be the focus of their discussions. In one sense I was

fortunate that the first group knew each other well enough that they moved beyond this narrow frame. I surmise that since they were all from the same district, they did not have to establish their "multicultural credentials" in the way that members of the other groups spent time doing.

Multicultural literacy for most of these teachers could be broken into two ideas - what counted as multicultural, and how ethnic and linguistic diversity impacted on learning. Some teachers had wider definitions than others, but for almost all of them the result of their definitions was a sensitivity to the needs of individual children, and the importance of differentiated instruction. These concerns were also the major implications for preservice literacy classes. Unlike the definitions of experts, the groups did not talk about issues of educating for democracy or equity and social justice. This may have been a result of the unconcious bias in who was selected - such issues may be more foregrounded for teachers in all-white schools. Clearly, as faculty, including a sensitivity to multicultural issues and celebrating diversity in our own classrooms will set an example for our preservice students to follow. The more difficult task of preparing them to negotiate the tensions between having high expectations and acknowledging personal responsibility for a student's failure is something we can strive to accomplish successfully.

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